Imelda Marcos' 'ill-gotten' jewels belong to govt, court rules

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A jewellery collection owned by former first lady Imelda Marcos was "ill-gotten", a Philippine court has ruled, potentially paving the way for an auction of millions of dollars worth of seized treasures.

A tiara inlaid with diamonds and South Sea Pearls from a collection seized by the government from former first lady Imelda Marcos in the late 1980s

The anti-graft Sandiganbayan court decided on Monday that the Malacanang Collection, the smallest of three confiscated from the Marcos estate and worth some $150,000, was rightfully owned by the government.

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"Partial judgement is hereby rendered declaring the pieces of jewellery, known as the Malacanang Collection, as ill-gotten, and are hereby forfeited in favour of petitioner Republic of the Philippines," read the 33-page ruling released Tuesday.

It is one of three collections seized from the Marcos estate, including a 60-piece set featuring a 150-carat Burmese ruby.

The other two sets are already in government hands, but the ruling is significant because previous attempts to auction off the entire haul have been derailed by legal issues relating to the Malacanang pieces.

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Officials said the court ruling on its forfeiture meant that an auction could now proceed.

An assessment made by Christie's in 1991 put the value of three collections at up to $8.5 million, though more than two decades on it is likely to be substantially higher.

The pieces in the smallest collection were seized from the Malacanang presidential palace after the 1986 "people power" revolution ended the two-decade regime of dictator Ferdinand Marcos.

He died in exile after fleeing to Hawaii with his family.

Imelda was known for her extravagant lifestyle and love of jewels, art and shoes, and the Marcos family still stand accused of stealing billions from state coffers.

The two other collections include 60 pieces of jewellery seized from Demetriou Roumeliotes, a Greek friend of the Marcoses as he was leaving the country amid the "people power" revolt.

Among the more expensive pieces in the entire collection are an antique sapphire and diamond necklace worth $220,000 and a Persian-style necklace made from more than 100 carats of yellow and pink diamonds.

The third collection is jewellery seized from the Marcoses when they fled to Hawaii, and subsequently turned over to Manila.

The Philippine government has said it has so far recovered about $4 billion of an estimated stolen wealth of $10 billion, but no one from the Marcos family has been convicted.

The government has long said it wanted to put the jewellery on public display or auction it off to raise funds for its poverty alleviation programmes.

But the Marcos family has tried to block the government from claiming the treasures, and had fought the seizure in court.

Monday's judgement could still be appealed. However, the Presidential Commission on Good Government, the agency tasked by the government to go after the fabled Marcos wealth, welcomed the decision.

"This is another victory for the Filipino people," commission chairman Andres Bautista told AFP.

He said he would confer with President Benigno Aquino on what to do with the jewels.

Aquino spokesman Herminio Coloma said no final decision on an auction had yet been made.

"The Filipino people have waited a long time for court decisions like this that would restore justice on the issue of stolen wealth," Coloma told reporters.

The government has said it is also still tracking more than 140 paintings by Picasso, van Gogh and other masters bought with stolen funds by the Marcoses.

They are among 300 artworks Marcos distributed to his cronies after his regime crumbled.

On Monday, a US judge sentenced a former secretary to Imelda Marcos up to six years in jail for conspiring to sell a Monet painting that went missing in 1995.

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